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Translating Edo euphemism

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ABSTRACT

The study of translation has increasingly drawn the attention of more scholars in the last few decades. The translation process has been reduced to different forms of analysis at one time or the other (see Catford, 1965; Uwajeh, 1994, 2001, 2007, etc) in an attempt to explain the hierarchical relationship at which translation equivalence may be achievable. Recently, however, more studies have shown that the existing four ranks/levels are not enough to successfully show the process that is involved in translation practice generally. This paper seeks to show one of these inadequacies as evident in the translation of euphemistic expressions in Edo. An additional level is, herein, proposed to be added to the existing four levels to give a five-level translation model. This paper is therefore, an improvement on the existing model and it is hoped that it will help in making the process of translation better understood in modern Linguistics.

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Introduction

Translation is gradually gaining more grounds within the study of languages especially in the area of Applied Linguistics. This has led to improvements on the existing translation theories at one point or the other, a culture that is leading ultimately to a better understanding of the notion and practice of translation. To understand and achieve the goal of translation, one cannot but find a way to marry meaning, culture and the information contained in the text, so as to arrive at the closest possible equivalence. This paper examines euphemistic expressions in Edo and the task of translating them into a target language like English. The paper proposes an additional level to the four levels adopted in Uwajeh (1994) for the purpose of achieving the desired equivalence between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) texts.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section considers the contributions of two major scholars in classifying translation process into different “ranks” and “levels”. The second section presents the inadequacy of the existing levels in translating Edo euphemistic expressions while section three makes a case for a fifth level of translation.

Ranks/Levels of Translation

The choice of the term “ranks” (Catford, 1965) or “level” (Uwajeh, 1994, 2001) of translation seem to have been motivated by the recognition by the different scholars, of the need to successfully capture and explain the gradual movement from the SL and the TL in the psychological orientation of language users.

Catford (1965: 24 - 25) gives what he calls the “ranks of translation”, which are explained to relate “to the ranks in grammatical (or phonological) hierarchy at which translation equivalence is established”. They are:

I. Word-for-word Translation (the rank at which SL words are replaced with equivalent TL words).

II. Literal Translation (the rank at which SL words are replaced with the TL words, but in conformity with TL grammar).

III. Free Translation (the rank that is claimed to be interchangeable with the SL text in actual situation and the expression is given as allowed in the TL).

In his view of the difference between the TL and SL, in the structure of higher-rank units, Uwajeh (1994, 2001) used the phrase “Levels of Translation” for his four-level model. He described this as the “blue print” for translation practice in what he calls “Performative Translatology” (Uwajeh, 2001: 230). The first three of Uwajeh’s four levels of translation correspond fairly with only a few modifications which are particularly visible in the change of terms. The levels of translation are characterized as 2.1 – 2.4 below.

Lexical Translation

At this first level of translation (in which the TL text is enclosed in single square brackets for easy recognition), the SL symbols are replaced with the TL symbols that can be used to express the same information to the TL users. This level, Uwajeh observes, involves more than simple replacements, and that the term “word-for-word” is therefore, misleading (Uwajeh, 1994: 10 - 11). Consider the lexical translation of the Edo sentences below into English as examples.

- 1(a) Íyè mwè gbé òfèn nódè
Lex. T:[mother my kill-past rat yesterday]
- (b) Èwé wúrù
Lex. T:[goat die-past]

Literal Translation

At the literal level, the information is represented in a more refined way in the TL. He observed that the literal translation can, in some cases, have the same form as the lexical level, but there is however a shift to the world view of the target language users, hence the structural refinement. He prefers to use double square brackets to enclose the translated texts at this level. For example,

- 2(a) Íyè mwè gbé òfèn nódè
Lex. T:[mother my kill rat yesterday]
Lit. T:[mother my kill-past rat yesterday]]
- (b) Èwé wúrù

Lex. T: [goat die]

Lit. T: [[goat die-past]]

Free Translation

At this third level, the information given in the SL is represented with the TL in a free form. Uwajeh explains that the information given at this level is expressed, using the actual TL structure in such a way that is easily understood by the TL users, and that single round brackets may be used to enclose the translated text. Consider the following examples:

3(a) Íyé mwè gbé òfèn nódè

Lex. T: [mother my kill-past rat yesterday]

Lit. T: [[mother my kill-past rat yesterday]]

Free T: (My mother killed a rat yesterday)

(b) Èwé wùrù

Lex. T: [goat die]

Lit. T: [[goat die-past]]

Free T: (A goat died)

Figurative Translation

This level is said to be necessary when the text that is to be translated involves special use of language such as idioms, proverbs, metaphor, proverbs, cult expressions, etc. Uwajeh (2001: 232) explains that the information at this level is given in the TL as it is used figuratively by the TL users. He calls this the “special effect” or “special purpose” translation and chooses double round brackets as an appropriate enclosure of the text at this level. For example, let us consider 4 below.

4 Déghé á má wú à ghá fè

Lex. T: [if one not die one will rich]

Lit. T: [[if one does not die, one will get rich]]

Free T: (If one does not die, one will be rich)

Fig. T: ((When there is life, there is hope))

Also, let us consider the Igbo and French examples below, as given in Uwajeh (2001: 233).

5(a) Áwò àsí ibēwē “wòkòm”

Áwò à - sí ibē - wē “wòkòm”

Lex. T: [FROG ARE TELL PEER THEY “wòkòm”]

Lit. T: [[Frogs are telling their peers “wòkòm”]]

Free T: (Frogs mock their peers for saying “wòkòm”)

Fig. T: ((The pot is calling the kettle black))

(b) Une fois n'est pas coutume

Une fois n' - est pas coutume

Lex. T: [one TIME not is not CUSTOM]

Lit. T: [[one time is not a custom]]

Free T: (Once does not constitute a custom)

Fig. T: ((One swallow does not make a summer))

The above overview of the ranks/levels of translation shows a clear and an increasing better understanding of the translation job and the process that is involved in the quest to achieving translation equivalence. In our drive towards achieving equivalence in translation, the more we pay attention to the information that we intend to pass across from the SL to the TL, the more likely we will be successful in achieving our goal. Uwajeh's model seems to have achieved remarkable success in this regard, since the TL users are most likely to find it easy in relating with the figurative meaning of such (figurative) expressions. Despite the remarkable progress, the existing models have not been successful in capturing the hierarchical ranks or levels that help to achieve equivalence in all forms of figurative expressions. Research has shown that some of these expressions can only be captured by more than four levels of translation. We intend to show, clearly, in the following section

that there is need for an additional translation level in translating Edo euphemism.

The Need for an Additional Level

In translating Edo euphemism into English, for example, the existing four-rank/level translation model is not enough to effectively show “the ranks in a grammatical (or phonological) hierarchy at which translation equivalence is established. The reason is that the present four-level model leaves out some information like connotative implications of such expressions that is relevant to the translation process. This limits our chances of achieving the closest possible equivalence in the translation of such expressions. The central nature of the issue of equivalence in translation makes it one of the many aspects of the translation job that is of interest to the translator. Since it can only be established by showing the ranks or levels in grammatical hierarchy, it becomes necessary to show these ranks/levels in such a way that the gradual move from SL expression to its equivalent in the TL as it is used by the TL users. Given the existing model, the Edo euphemistic expressions in 6 below will be rendered as 7.

6(a) Òzó rriè òbò nè ò fú nyáá ègbé

(b) Ì rriè ègbé òwá

(c) Òtò rri òrhuè

7(a) Òzó rriè òbò nè ò fú nyáá ègbé

Lex. T: [Ozo take hand that it cool on-top body]

Lit. T: [[Ozo past-take a hand that be-cool on top of body]]

Free T: (Ozo placed a cool hand on his body)

Fig. T: ((Ozo kicked the bucket))

(b) Ì rriè ègbé òwá

Lex. T: [I go body house]

Lit. T: [[I am-go-ing to the body of house]]

Free T: (I am going to the side of the house)

Fig. T: ((I am going to ease myself))

(c) Òtò rri òrhuè

Lex. T: [ground eat white-chalk]

Lit. T: [[the ground past-eat white chalk]]

Free T: (The ground has eaten the white chalk)

Fig. T: ((The king has passed on))

An objective observation of the above renditions (in 7) reveals that the information provided through the ranks/levels is not exhaustive. The level that has been left out of the hierarchy of equivalence in the existing model will be able to provide the excluded information, if it is added. In 7a – c above, the expressions inform the Edo native speaker that “Ozo died”, “I am going to excrete”, and that “The king is dead”, respectively. Such information is central to the proper understanding of the euphemistic expressions and, therefore, too much to be ignored. Ignoring this level of information will ultimately imply a jump-level translation analysis, a situation that should be avoided in strict translation practices. This vital information should be well represented and should be so done by a separate translation level, a level that has been unconsciously left out of translation practices till date.

A Case for a Pragmatic Level of Translation

Based on the discussion in the previous sections, the hierarchical gap left behind in the existing levels of translation becomes obvious. In order to ensure that the hierarchical ranks/levels are well represented, a case is hereby made for a fifth level of translation. Like the figurative level, this new level is a special effect translation level that is necessary for the translation of figurative expressions, specifically euphemisms. This fifth level, we will call the pragmatic level.

As the name suggests, this new level of translation shows what the SL users actually used the euphemistic expressions to communicate. It becomes necessary in order to explain to the TL users, the connotative implication of the given expression, so as to enable them to have an experience of the euphemistic effect of such expression, as already experienced by the SL users. A level such as what is being proposed is very useful to the translator who is interested in achieving equivalence in his/her work. It should therefore be well embraced and put into practice, so as to make the translation process more productive. It will also ensure a serial, easy, understandable and well co-ordinate movement from the SL to the TL, without which equivalence will become elusive. This pragmatic level is better placed between the “free” and the “figurative” level because of its effect and relevance. Its usefulness can be felt in reflecting the gradual and logical movement from SL linguistic experience to that of the TL. If the tradition of easy identification is anything to go by, the suggestion given here is that the text at this new (pragmatic) level should be enclosed in-between double round brackets “(())” while the figurative-level text earlier proposed should, by this recent proposal, be enclosed in-between single braces “{ }”. This bracketing proposal, which is not theoretically motivated, is to ensure a better representation of our new five-level model of translation for the translation of euphemistic expression in Edo. For an illustration, the Edo expressions translated as in 7 above will be rendered as shown in 8 below.

8(a) Òzó rriè òbọ̀ nẹ̀ ọ́ fú nyà ègbé
Lex.T:[Ozo take hand that it cool on-top body]
Lit. T:[[Ozo past-take a hand that be-cool on top of body]]

Free T:(Ozo placed a cool hand on his body)
Prag.T:((Ozo died))
Fig. T:{Ozo kicked the bucket}

(b) Í rriè ègbé òwá
Lex.T:[I go body house]
Lit. T:[I am-go-ing to the body of house]
Free T:(I am going to the side of the house)
Prag.T:((I am going to excrete))
Fig. T:{I am going to ease myself}

(c) Òtò rí òrhùè
Lex.T:[ground eat white-chalk]
Lit.T:[the ground past-eat white chalk]
Free T:(The ground has eaten the white chalk)
Prag.T:((Mother is dead))

Fig. T:{The king has passed on}

The data in 8a – c above show a more adequate representation of the hierarchical drive towards the achievement of translation equivalence in the translation of Edo euphemism. All users and non-users of Edo language will find this pattern of translation easier to comprehend. This new level serves as a bridge that shows the relationship between the denotative kind of SL expression (represented in the free translation level) and

the actual connotative encoding of the expression that has given rise to the TL euphemistic rendition (represented in the figurative translation level). This is particularly important to the translation process, since the difference between the free translation – “Ozo placed a cool hand on his body” – and the figurative translation – “Ozo kicked the bucket” – for example, is the fact that Ozo died. This information can only be represented at the pragmatic level of translation.

Conclusion

This work does not constitute a radical departure from the existing translation practice, but represents an improvement on it. The very essential “pragmatic” level of translation, which has been ignored, has been brought to bear with the clear aim of making translation theorists find their job easier and more interesting. Also, the paper has brought to our minds, the fact that we cannot continue to ignore the important link between the SL denotation and the TL connotation which is the end point of the process. This may be considered as an invitation to translation scholars to dig deep into the interesting nature of African figurative expressions through the manifestation of euphemistic expressions, as an aspect of language use. Such studies may further reveal the nature of African languages and translation.

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